

CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS
HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

FILE NAME: 706-08 South First Street
DATE OF APPLICATION: March 19, 2003
APPLICANT: Minnesota Historical Society
DATE OF HEARING: April 8, 2003
HPC SITE/DISTRICT: St. Anthony Falls Historic District
CATEGORY: Contributing
CLASSIFICATION: Historic Variance
STAFF INVESTIGATION AND REPORT: Greg Mathis
DATE: April 2, 2003

A. SITE DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUND:

The Washburn A Mill Complex sits on a site bounded by First and Second Streets South, Chicago Avenue, and the North Star Blanket Factory. The mill complex is both a National Historic Landmark (NHL) and a contributing property to the St. Anthony Falls Historic District. Cadwallader C. Washburn built the A Mill in 1874. In 1878, it and the C Mills were destroyed by fire. When the two mills were rebuilt in 1879-80, they became the first automatic, all-roller, gradual reduction mills in the country. Another fire gutted the mill in 1928; however, it was rebuilt and continued to operate until 1965. In 1991, a major fire caused parts of the A Mill's stone walls to collapse. The NHL nomination states that the complex, which is the only surviving manifestation of C.C. Washburn's technological innovations, "symbolizes the revolutionary technological and organizations innovations that the Washburn Crosby Company contributed to the American milling industry and, second, the birth and subsequent development of General Mills into the first truly national milling company."

In March 2001, the Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) approved the applicant's request to rehabilitate the A Mill for use as a museum/office building. On January 14, 2003, the HPC approved a Certificate of Appropriateness for a comprehensive sign plan for the building (see Attachments 1 and 2). The approved signage included a 14'0" wide x 15'9" tall roof sign mounted on top of the new elevator structure located within the ruins of the A Mill. The approved sign has a white background surrounded by a gray frame, with a single stroke of white neon set behind the frame, to illuminate the edges of the sign. The sign features a three-dimensional version of the museum logo that reads "Mill City Museum" in 1'9" to 3'3" letters surrounded by single stroke neon. The applicant proposed backlit plastic letters, but the HPC approved the sign with a condition that the sign be redesigned to eliminate the backlit plastic letters.

B. PROPOSED CHANGES:

The applicant is applying for n Historic Variance to allow a 14'0" wide x 15'9" tall rooftop sign that is prohibited by both the Zoning Code and the HPC adopted *Guidelines for Signs and Signage for Historic Properties and Districts*.

C. GUIDELINE CITATIONS:

ST. ANTHONY FALLS HISTORIC DISTRICT GUIDELINES (1980)

Purpose

- 1) preserve the memory of past events
- 2) encourage sympathetic new development
- 4) foster along the riverfront and adjacent areas a viable community geared to the pedestrian.

GUIDELINES FOR SIGNS & SIGNAGE FOR HISTORIC PROPERTIES & DISTRICTS (1993)

INTENT OF GUIDELINES

These guidelines outline sign usage for historic districts and properties. Signs play an important role in maintaining the quality of properties and districts. Installations and designs that are not sensitive to the architecture and history jeopardize the character of the buildings, neighborhoods, and districts. Signs create a framework that enhances the worth and potential of the historic properties and districts. Signs should be designed and installed with sensitivity to historical design and manufacturing methods.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

Codes:

- a. All signage is subject to Minneapolis building and zoning codes.

Installation:

- a. Signage is usually of a temporary nature. Thus, signage installation must have a minimal impact on the building and must allow the building to return to its original condition upon signage removal.

CHAPTER 599. HERITAGE PRESERVATION REGULATIONS (2001)

ARTICLE IX. HISTORIC VARIANCE

599.490. Purpose. This article is established to encourage the preservation and reuse of landmarks and properties in historic districts by providing the commission with authority to recommend departure from the literal requirements of any of the applicable zoning regulations.

599.510. Hearing on application for historic variance. The commission shall hold a public hearing on each complete application for historic variance as provided in section 599.170. Following the public hearing, the commission shall make findings with respect to the proposed historic variance and shall submit the same together with its recommendation to the zoning and planning committee of the city council.

599.520. Required findings for historic variance. Before recommending approval of a historic variance, the commission shall make findings that the variance is compatible with the preservation of the property and with other properties in the area, and that the variance is necessary to alleviate undue hardship due to special conditions or circumstances unique to the property and not created by the applicant.

599.530. Historic variance conditions and guarantees. The commission may impose such conditions on any historic variance and require such guarantees as it deems reasonable and necessary to protect the public interest and to ensure compliance with the standards and purposes of this chapter.

599.540. City council decision. The city council shall make the final decision on all historic variances.

D. FINDINGS:

1. The Washburn A Mill Complex is both a National Historic Landmark and a contributing property to the St. Anthony Falls Historic District.
2. On January 14, 2003, the HPC approved a Certificate of Appropriateness for a comprehensive sign plan for the Mill City Museum that included a 14' x 15' 9" on-premise roof sign facing the river that read "Mill City Museum."
3. Chapter 543, On-Premise Signs, of the city's zoning code prohibits roof signs. There is no authorized zoning variance to allow a prohibited sign.
4. Section 599.490 of the Heritage Preservation Regulations authorizes the HPC to recommend a variance from any applicable zoning regulation to encourage the preservation and reuse of landmarks and properties in historic districts.
5. The proposed roof sign will identify the location of the Mill City Museum and will enhance the visibility of the restored historic property.
6. The proposed roof sign is a reasonable use of the property and is consistent with the historic character of the property and other mill buildings in the district. Historic photographs show that the Washburn A Mill Complex had a roof sign during the period of significance for the district. Other roof signs present in the milling areas of the district include the North Star Blanket, Gold Medal Flour, and Pillsbury's Best Flour signs. Therefore, the proposed use is compatible with the preservation of the property and with other properties in the area.
7. The north (river-facing) elevation of the A Mill is fragile and further drilling into the wall to support a large wall sign could impair its structural integrity. Therefore, the variance is necessary to alleviate undue hardship due to special conditions or circumstance unique to the property and not created by the applicant.

E. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the HPC adopt staff findings and forward to the City Council a recommendation to approve an historic variance to allow the proposed rooftop sign, subject to the following conditions:

1. The sign must comply with all of the conditions imposed by the HPC when the HPC approved a Certificate of Appropriateness for the sign.
2. The Historic Variance is only valid for the proposed 14'0" wide x 15'9" tall roof sign. The sign cannot be changed in any way. If the sign is removed, a new application for an Historic Variance shall be required.